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Folk Songs of Western Odisha: Soulful Sounds of Village Culture

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Abstract

Folk songs are sung either individually or in groups during festivals, rituals, and social gatherings in Western Odisha. Inspired by the audience and the occasion, singers often adapt and reshape songs spontaneously, reflecting their creativity, memory, and performance skill. Sambalpuri folk songs frequently include praises of local deities worshipped in the region and easily touch the hearts of listeners through their simplicity, rhythm, and emotional depth. In this region, music is not only a source of joy and celebration but also a medium to express empathy, sorrow, and collective feeling in times of grief.

The folk songs of Western Odisha are simple, graceful, melodious, and deeply captivating in tune and sound. These songs are not merely meant for entertainment; they also communicate social values, customs, and shared cultural ethics. Their musical appeal often exceeds their literary form. Western Odisha possesses a distinct folklore tradition that gives it a separate cultural identity within Odisha. Like folklore itself, its folk literature—especially its songs—expresses the lived experience and collective consciousness of the people. The true spirit of this folk tradition is also reflected in the folk and tribal dances of the region. Rooted in the abundance of local flora and fauna, occupations, rituals, and religious beliefs, the people of this region have shaped a vibrant cultural world commonly known as "Sambalpuri Culture," which includes Sambalpuri folk music, song, and dance.

The rural environment of Western Odisha is the birthplace of these songs, while the Sambalpuri language serves as the medium of their preservation and transmission. These songs have no written tradition and continue through oral transmission across generations. Women and men both contribute to this tradition through songs connected with domestic life, labour, rituals, festivals, and devotion. These songs constitute the original cultural wealth of the people, and their most essential features are collectiveness, continuity, and universality.

Keywords: *Western Odisha, Sambalpuri Culture, Folk Song, Folk Culture, Sambalpuri Folk Song.*

Introduction

To understand the folk culture of any region, it is important to study its language, customs, festivals, traditions, and folk literature. Folk songs, dances, and music reflect the cultural life of the people and are key areas of research.

Western Odisha has a unique identity due to its geography, traditions, and rich Sambalpuri culture. It includes districts like Bargarh, Sambalpur, Sundargarh, and Kalahandi. The region has a strong cultural unity and is home to many tribal communities such as Binjhal, Sahanra, Mirdha, Gond, Kondh, Sabar and Munda. Folk songs, commonly known as Sambalpuri songs, are passed down orally and express the joys, sorrows, love, and struggles of rural life. They reflect collective community feelings rather than individual thoughts

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and are closely connected to social customs and traditions. These songs are simple, realistic, and based on everyday life. They continue to evolve over generations, providing emotional relief and preserving the cultural heritage of Western Odisha.

Literature Review

Sambalpuri folk songs have gained international recognition for their uniqueness, yet extensive research on them remains limited. In the early twentieth century, some artists and scholars began studying the folklore of Western Odisha and brought its richness to wider attention. However, their work mainly focused on literary aspects like folk songs, music, and dance, while neglecting deeper academic and analytical studies at the grassroots level.

Several studies on the folk songs of Western Odisha have been conducted, and a few books have been published. Notable works include "**Culture and Tradition of West Odisha" (2011***), "***Folk Songs and Folk Dances of Kalahandi"** (2006), and **"West Orissa: Past and Present"** (2009). Although these books include contributions from eminent scholars, the discussions on Sambalpuri folk songs are brief and provide only a general overview. **Sri Kumar Hassan's** book *"***Sambalpuri Loka Sahitya"** in Odia (Cuttack, 1983), is a study of some folk tales and folk songs of the undivided district of Sambalpur and contains some folk songs, Sambalpuri Dance and folk tales collected by him. **Dr. Nimai Charan Panda** then working in Sambalpur University published *"***Paschim Odishara Loka Sahityara Swarup**" in 1989. **Dr. Mahendra Kumar Mishra's** *"***Paschim Odishara Loka Sanskruti"** (Friends Publishers, Cuttack, 1990) contains several critical essays on the folk songs of West Odisha in addition to some folk tales and folk dances collected by him.

The Post-Graduate Department of Odia, Sambalpur University first collected and published folk songs and dances of Western Odisha. Key works include **"Paschim Odishara Loka Geet"** (1996) by Dr. Anjali Padhi and **"Loka Gita Re Samajika Jeebanara Swarupa"** (1998) by Dr. D.N. Nayak, who also published **"Paschim Odishara Loka Nrutya"** (2004) featuring contributions on various folk song traditions. Other notable books include **"Paschim Odishara Prasiddha Jatra o Parva Parvani"** (2002) by Dr. Shyam Sundar Dhar and **"Kalahandira Loksahitya***"* (2003) edited by Parameswar Mund. However, most works focus on literary aspects, lacking scientific and analytical study. **Dr. Chitrasen Pashayat** has edited a book in Odia titled *"***Paschim Odishdra Loka Geeta"** (Published by Folklore Foundation, Odisha, Bhubaneswar, 2008) containing more than thirty critical essays on various types of folk songs related to folk dances of West Odisha by celebrated writers from all parts of Odisha.

Methodology

- Developed a structured research questionnaire for data collection.
- Prepared an interview schedule to obtain systematic responses from the respondents.
- Conducted fieldwork through field study, participatory observation, interviews, and group discussions.
- Used informal interviews and personal observation to collect qualitative and experiential data.
- Gave greater emphasis to primary sources of data collection than secondary sources.
- Collected primary data directly from respondents through observation, interviews, and questionnaires.
- Used secondary sources such as books, research articles, reports, and other published materials for supportive analysis.

Visited several places of Western Odisha and collected related data, materials and others valuable information. Interviewed and contacted with many **original performers, Scholars, Gurus, Artists, and Key Resource Persons** through an interview schedule. The facts, views and performances recorded in audio and video format. Took photographs with them for the references; prepared a schedule, which is a structure of set of questions on this present research topic asked by me personally. The order of questions, the language of

the questions and the arrangement of parts of the schedule are suitable as per the requirements of respondents. It enclosed direct questions as well as questions in tabular form. The result of the schedule is that, the information collected through schedule is relatively more accurate than that obtained through questionnaires.

Hypothesis

The present research is based on the following hypotheses:

1. From the origin/inception point of view, Folk Song of Western Odisha has hardly any historical fact to shed light on it. So, it will not be appropriate if we fix the age of its origin simply based on assumptions.
2. Folk culture of Western Odisha is related to ancient times, but there is not so strong argument to establish its origin. All the parameters like size, shape and identification keep on changing with the transiting lifestyle of human society.
3. The Research Fellows, Key Resource Person and old age artists of this region believed that since the inception of the human civilization, this region was experiencing a rich folk and tribal culture. Which includes folk dance, folk music and folk songs.
4. Since time immemorial, the inhabitants of these areas have been sustaining a social discipline life. The people of western part of Odisha have been observed various religious and ritualistic folk festivals. All the occasions, fairs, festivals, social ceremonies are accompanied with Dance, Music and songs in their life.

Regional Variations of Folk Songs in Western Odisha

Although Western Odisha is a vast region, the cultural characteristics of its different areas vary based on their originality and local identity. For example, ***Banabadi, Dhap songs,*** and***Bangri songs***are folk songs of Balangir and Kalahandi districts. Similarly, ***Dalkhai, Rasarakeli, Maelajada, Jhaniphula, Jaiphula, and jamudali*** are folk songs of the undivided Sambalpur district. Karma, Jhumar, and other tribal songs belong to the districts of Jharsuguda and Sundargarh. Danda songs and Nachania songs are folk songs of Subarnapur district. Most of the folk songs in this region are mainly emotional and expressive in nature. In some cases, these songs even reach the extreme limits of obscenity. However, since they are associated with religious rituals and traditions, there is no restriction on their performance or listening.

For example, during the festival of ***Dalkhai***, celebrated on the Ashtami day of the month of Ashwina in districts like Bargarh, Sambalpur, and Balangir of Western Odisha, both married and unmarried girls gather in village streets and perform songs and dances, sometimes using strong or explicit language. Society does not object to this, and people participate in and enjoy these performances.

Similarly, on the night of the full moon in the month of Phalguna, during the Holi festival, men gather in village streets, sing songs in loud and bold language, and perform *Holika Dahan*. During the Rath Yatra, the charioteer, standing on the chariot, sings songs and speaks in a lively and sometimes bold manner.

Classification of Folk Songs in Western Odisha

The folk songs of this region can be divided into **five categories**:

1. Children's folk songs
2. Adolescent girls' folk songs
3. Male-dominated folk songs
4. Female-dominated folk songs
5. Group folk songs (both men and women)

(a) Children's Folk Songs	(b) Songs of Adolescent Girls	(c) Male-oriented Folk Songs
1. Feeding songs 2. Lullabies 3. Chaka Chaka Bhaunri 4. Sleeping songs 5. Ichiri Michiri 6. Songs sung while feeding milk 7. Songs during a child learning to walk 8. Songs during oil massage 9. Songs during playtime 10. Songs while making the child dance 11. Affectionate/playful songs 12. Songs to console a crying child	1. Kathau Kuili 2. Humo or Bauli 3. Sajani 4. Bangri 5. Shilolai 6. Samdhen game songs 7. GhoGho Rani 8. Chhurki songs 9. Galara 10. Kham Khamalo 11. Athul Mathul 12. Boria 13. Jira Labanga / Kala Kokila	1. Halia 1. Parashuram songs 2. Sagadia 3. Kendra songs 4. Maden songs 5. Nachania 6. Sanchar 7. Bajania 8. Samprada 9. Krushnaguru 10. Digdigo 11. Danda songs 12. Gaurabadi 13. Saramangala 14. Ghughunadia
(d) Female-oriented Folk Songs	**(e) Songs Sung by Both Men and Women**	
1. Dalkhai 2. Rasarakeli 3. Maelajada 4. Jaiphula 5. Jamudali 6. Jharire Jhara 7. Palharua and Latabachha 8. Chapkarati 9. Chutkuchuta	1. Karma 2. Jhumar 3. Ghudka 4. Bajashal 5. Dhap	

Some Dance Traditions Carrying the Features of Folk Songs

Folk songs and folk dances across India reflect local culture, traditions, and social practices, and are often called people's dance (Gana Nrutya). They are mainly preserved in rural areas, providing joy, relaxation, and relief from the hardships of daily life. These art forms are closely connected with happiness, peace, and the essence of life, and are present in every event of rural society.

As India is an agricultural country, folk songs express the emotions, struggles, and lifestyle of farming communities. They are natural and simple, reflecting real-life experiences rather than artificial styles.

In Western Odisha, modern influences are limited, so traditional lifestyles remain strong. Sambalpuri folk culture is especially visible in tribal areas, where folk songs and dances play a vital role in festivals, social functions, and daily life, deeply connected with nature throughout the year.

Danda Nata, associated with Shaivism and Shaktism traditions, is a popular religious and cultural group dance of Western Odisha. Only men participate in it. It is performed in four stages in this region:

1. *Dhuli Danda*
2. *Pani Danda*
3. *Agni Danda*
4. *Danda Nata* (Sixteen acts/ **"Sohala Suanga"**) along with Bani Butala performance

In Dhuli Danda, under the intense midday heat, the performers worship Goddess Parvati as the deity of agriculture. With bare bodies, they lie on the ground and symbolically prepare fields or plots, singing agricultural songs and dancing to the rhythm of earthen drums. During this, the qualities, usefulness, and importance of the Mahua tree are also described in the songs.

In the final stage of Danda Nata, the ***"Sohala Suanga"*** (sixteen dramatic acts) is performed. The artists enter the stage dancing, introduce themselves, and perform songs and dances according to their respective roles.In some places of Western Odisha, after the Suanga performance, ***Leela Danda*** based on Vaishnavism is also presented. In Leela Danda, the stories of love, romance, separation, and union of Radha and Krishna are depicted through folk songs. This is known as ***"Bani Butal"*** in the Sambalpuri language. Characters like Krishna, Radha, Duti, Chandrasena, Kutila, etc., take part in these performances.

Karma and Dalkhai Tradition of Western Odisha

On the auspicious day of **Bhadra Shukla Ekadashi**, various tribal communities of Western Odisha such as the *Binjhal, Kol, Khadia, Oraon, Kisan, Bhuyan, Ganda, and Sahara,* along with other non-tribal groups celebrate the ***Karma*** festival with great joy and enthusiasm. Goddess ***Karamasani*** is the main deity worshipped during this festival. To seek protection from disasters, relief from epidemics, and peace in the village, the young men and women observe fasting and perform rituals on this day and organize the Karma festival.

The most important aspect of Karma worship is its folk songs. Since tribal communities traditionally do not have a written language, they sing these songs in their spoken language. These songs are memorized and passed down from generation to generation. The language and emotions of these songs are simple and lively, reflecting all aspects of daily life. Karma songs depict their joys and sorrows, good and bad experiences, love and affection, as well as various scenes of rural life and nature.

Jhumer is considered a special musical style associated with Karma songs. These songs include praises of Goddess Karamasani, her glory, and the rituals of worship, describing everything from bringing the branch of the Karma tree to the conclusion of the festival.

After the **Dalkhai** worship, the songs, dances, and musical performances presented to please Goddess Dalkhai are known as ***Dalkhai*** songs. These represent the richness and excellence of the tribal folk culture of Western Odisha. In Dalkhai songs, folk artists express their emotions in a direct and simple language. These songs are deeply connected with the theme of love and romance (Shringara rasa). They beautifully depict love, relationships, and marriage celebrations in common people's lives. Through these songs, young men and women express the intensity of their love.

Dalkhai songs also portray various aspects of rural life. Though primarily based on romantic themes, they are accompanied by dance and musical instruments. Besides love, these songs also include elements from mythology, legends, history, religious texts, and different social situations, presenting a vivid and realistic picture of folk life.

Sanchar and Dhap Dance of Western Odisha

Sanchar art is an ancient performing art of Western Odisha. Its main feature is the combination of song, rhythm of musical instruments, and coordinated foot movements in dance. In Western Odisha, it is also popularly known as ***Bahak-Gahak.***

It is widely performed during major religious festivals such as Ram Navami, Janmashtami, Shivaratri, and Dhanu Yatra in districts like Sambalpur, Bargarh, Balangir, Sundargarh, and also in the border areas of Odisha and Chhattisgarh.
The main performer of Sanchar art is the *Bahak*, who plays the ***mrudanga (drum),*** sings songs, and dances simultaneously. The songs performed by the Bahak include various poetic forms like Chhanda, Chaupadi, and Champu, along with humorous *Dagdhamali* style and Sambalpuri songs.

Among the various dance forms of Western Odisha, **Dhap dance** is a group dance tradition based on the theme of love and romance (*Shringara rasa*). It is mainly practiced among tribal communities such as the *Kandha, Sabara, and Dom* tribes in the tribal-dominated regions of Balangir and Kalahandi districts.

This dance is both a social and group performance involving songs and dance. Among the Kandha tribe, there are several types of Dhap dance, such as:

- BihaDhap
- Badi Dhap
- ChercheraDhap
- Parab Dhap
- Dhangara-DhangariDhap

Bajnia and NachniaTradition

Bajnia and Nachnia folksongs are usually used during social occasions like marriage in rural villages. The tunes, rhythms, beats and styles of both the folk songs are different from each other. Bajnia folk songs are used by the members of musical instrument band, thus known as Bajnia. ***Nachnia*** or dancers are specially inducted in the procession of marriage function (baraat) to make it musical. They used to sing to the tune of accompanying band garbed in colourful attires, tied ghunghru at ankles and holding ***Chamar/ Chaunr*** in hands. More than one Nachnia are found accompanying barat. The used lyrics are mostly related to marriage besides spiritual and love types. The Nachnia used to recite stories from Purana and classical literature in their own style.

Gaurbadi (Stick Dance)Song

Usually, people of *Gauda* community used to display folkdance ***Gaurbadi*** on the occasions of marriage and dolapurnima (Holi). The dancers used to stand in a circle with holding sticks of about 1.5 to feet long in each hand and their dance starts with their sticks striking with each other besides thumping their feet on the ground in various styles by singing the gourbadi folk song. The singer used to sing with standing within the circle and others follow his recital. One of them acts as *Sutradhar (Mediator)* in the dance, who used to shout '***oho bhai oho'*** occasionally.

They used to dance in a circular form in the beats of accompanying ***Mandal*** as their musical instrument with beating their stick that is about two feet in length. Some dancers also used to wear ornaments. It's another form is known as ***Kaisabadi***. People of Goud community used raise funds for *Dipawali* after worshipping their sticks in the similar manner and it is known as ***Digdigo***. Only male members of the community participate in it.

Ghudka Folk art

Ghudka or Ghubkudu is a folk musical instrument. It is a hollow cylinder made of wood of about one foot long and it's one end is tightly covered with Godhi (iguana) lather that has small hole in the centre. A fine string made of Godhi lather runs through the hole that is known as '*Paent'*. Holding the wooden cylinder under the left armpit, the string is stretched tight by the left hand and stroked by a striker holding in right hand to get a sweet musical sound. The tightness of the string is changed more often to get variable music. Both male and female perform in the dance by singing Ghudka folk song.

The folk song is performed in all the three forms, mono, duet and chorus. The vibrating sounds of the string in variety, pronouncement, beats and performance count more important that content of the folk song. Male used to play the Ghudka, whereas female used to sing and dance. The Shabar tribe in undivided districts of Balangir, Sambalpur and Kalahandi found to perform this folk song and dance with visiting village to village for begging.

Ghumura and Samparda folk dance

Ghumura is a male oriented heroic song and dance form of undivided kalahandi district of Western Odisha. It is performed in every village of kalahandi. It is vibrant form of male dominated performing art form. This dance form has derived its name from the instrument used in it. Ghumura looks like an earthen pitcher with long neck made of clay. The front side face of the pitcher is covered with the skin of **iguana** (A Type of reptile), locally known as "**godhi" or gue**. It is played on with both the hands. One of the dancers plays on with **Nishan** and another dancer plays on with a pair of cymbals (jhanj) made of brass. **Ghumura** is performed by a group of trained male performers is accompanied by Nisan, jhanj, turi and sometimes dhol and **mandal** etc. Ghumura dance with heroic songs is being performed. It is played in auspicious occasions like **Dashara, Pushpuni, Nukhai** etc. by the people of *Gonds, Bhatras, Bhumias, Khetriaya and the Paika tribe*.

In Ghumura dance, the singer sings the Ghumura songs based on different epics like **Ramayana, Mahabharata and other Puranas** Sometimes songs taken from history or social contexts. Often the songs of ghumura include the concept of love, affection, union, separation and humour in sambalpuri dialect to amuse the spectators. The singer also sings the songs composed long ago in the names of kings, queens and landlords as they were the patrons of dance. The series of songs used in Ghumura dance is called as **Jhumer, Chakdi and padi**

There are several folk dances in Western Odisha based on musical instrument Mrudanga (Khola) **Samprada** is one of them. It is used to be danced and sung the devotional folk songs in chorus. It is also known as **Rahas Mandali** in Kalahandi. It is identified as **Yatra** in some villages in Sambalpur region. The main attraction of the dance is the typical style of dance of the drummer (Mrudang) besides his swift foot-works. It was started during the propagation of **Vaishnav** cult. It is a derived version of **Sankirtan** done by Shree Chaitanya cult followers. Samprada is included in the list of folk dances in due course of time.

Mrudangas and Kastals are the main musical instruments used in this form of folk dance. The Mrudangs used in the dance is called **"Rola".** The drummer and other dance artists used to wear Dhoti and Ganji besides using a Gamchha as the waistband and Ghunghru at the ankles. It is mostly found in Balangir and Kalahandi districts besides undivided Sambalpur district. The main occasions for its performance are **Rathyatra (Ashadh), Rahasapurnima (Fagun) Dola Purnima (Chaitra), Makara Sankranti (Magh), Chandan Yatra (Baishakh), Dhanuyatra (Pousha), Ramnavami (Chaitra) and Shitalshashthi (Jaishtha)**. The chorus song with dance is performed in unison as per the lyrics of the singer and the beats of the drummer.

Conclusion

The current status of folk song traditions in Western Odisha reflects both continuity and challenge. These songs still remain a vital part of rural life, closely connected with festivals, rituals, and social gatherings, especially within tribal and traditional communities. Sambalpuri folk songs continue to express the emotions, values, and cultural identity of the people, preserving a rich heritage passed down through generations.

However, rapid modernization, Globalization, Digitalization. Migration Urbanization, and the influence of popular media have gradually reduced their presence in everyday life, particularly among the younger generation. The shift from oral tradition to digital platforms has also changed the way these songs are performed and preserved.

Despite these challenges, efforts by local artists, cultural organizations, and researchers are helping to revive and promote folk songs through stage performances, recordings, and academic studies. Thus, while the tradition is facing transformation, it still survives as a strong symbol of cultural identity, with hope for preservation through conscious efforts and cultural awareness.

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